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ABSTRACT

In spring 2003, more than 130 aspiring, novice, and experienced K-12 principals from public, private, and parochial schools were asked to identify in rank order the top 10 most critical issues facing schools. The issue most frequently identified as most critical was accountability, with staffing next, followed by discipline, time, funding, external support, parents, safety, special education, and plant operations, in that order. Findings of a survey of teachers by Phi Delta Kappa show that teachers most frequently cite the lack of parental support and interest as the most critical issue. Parents, responding to a Gallup poll, have identified the lack of financial support/funding/spending money as the most critical issue. The focus of this paper is on accountability and the demands accountability requirements place on principals. A plan is outlined to help principals engage teachers in improving school performance scores as related to accountability programs. The outlined plan was used in 2001-2002 at a high school in Louisiana and was judged to have increased school performance. Strategies are also suggested for fostering parent engagement. (Contains 14 references.) (SLD)

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MSERA Presentation

November 6, 2003

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

CRITICAL ISSUES

AS IDENTIFIED BY

ASPIRING, NOVICE & EXPERIENCED PRINCIPALS

Food for Thought

In the spring of 2003, over 130 aspiring, novice, and experienced k-12 principals from public, private and parochial schools were asked to identify in rank order the top ten most critical issues facing schools.

Survey of Attitudes Regarding Issues Facing School Administrators

This survey is being conducted to ascertain the views of aspiring administrators relevant to key issues facing school principals. Please respond to this voluntary survey. Your cooperation is greatly appreciated and your anonymity will be assured. Returning the completed survey implies consent for your participation.

Please circle your responses

1. *Gender:* *Male* *Female*

2. Age: 22-25 26-30 31-35 36-40 40 or older

3. *Are you currently teaching?* *YES* *NO*
   If so, what grade level? *Elementary* *Middle* *Junior* *High*
   If middle or secondary school, what subject area(s)? *English* *Fine Arts* *Math*
   Physical Education *Science* *Social Studies*
   Vocational *Other*_____
   What is your most immediate administrative career goal? *Assistant Principal* *Principal* *Central Office*
   At which school level would you most likely apply for an administrative position?
   Elementary *Middle* *Junior* *High*

4. Are you currently an administrator? YES NO
   If so, what grade level? Elementary Middle Junior High

5. *How many years have you been in education as a teacher?* *Less than 1* *1-4* *5-8* *9-12* *13 or over*
   .....as an administrator? *Less than 1* *1-4* *5-8* *9-12* *13 or over*

6. In which system are you currently employed? Public Private (non-parochial) Parochial

7. *Highest Degree obtained:* *Bachelor* *Master* *Specialist* *PhD/EdD*

8. What are the most significant issues affecting the principalship today? Please list and rank in order of importance from most significant (1) to least significant (10).

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

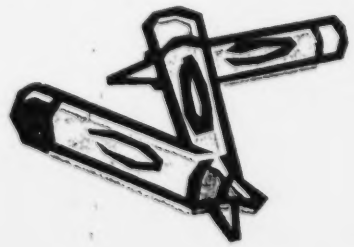
In three paragraphs or less, state your rationale for your most significant issue on the back of this survey.

Methodology

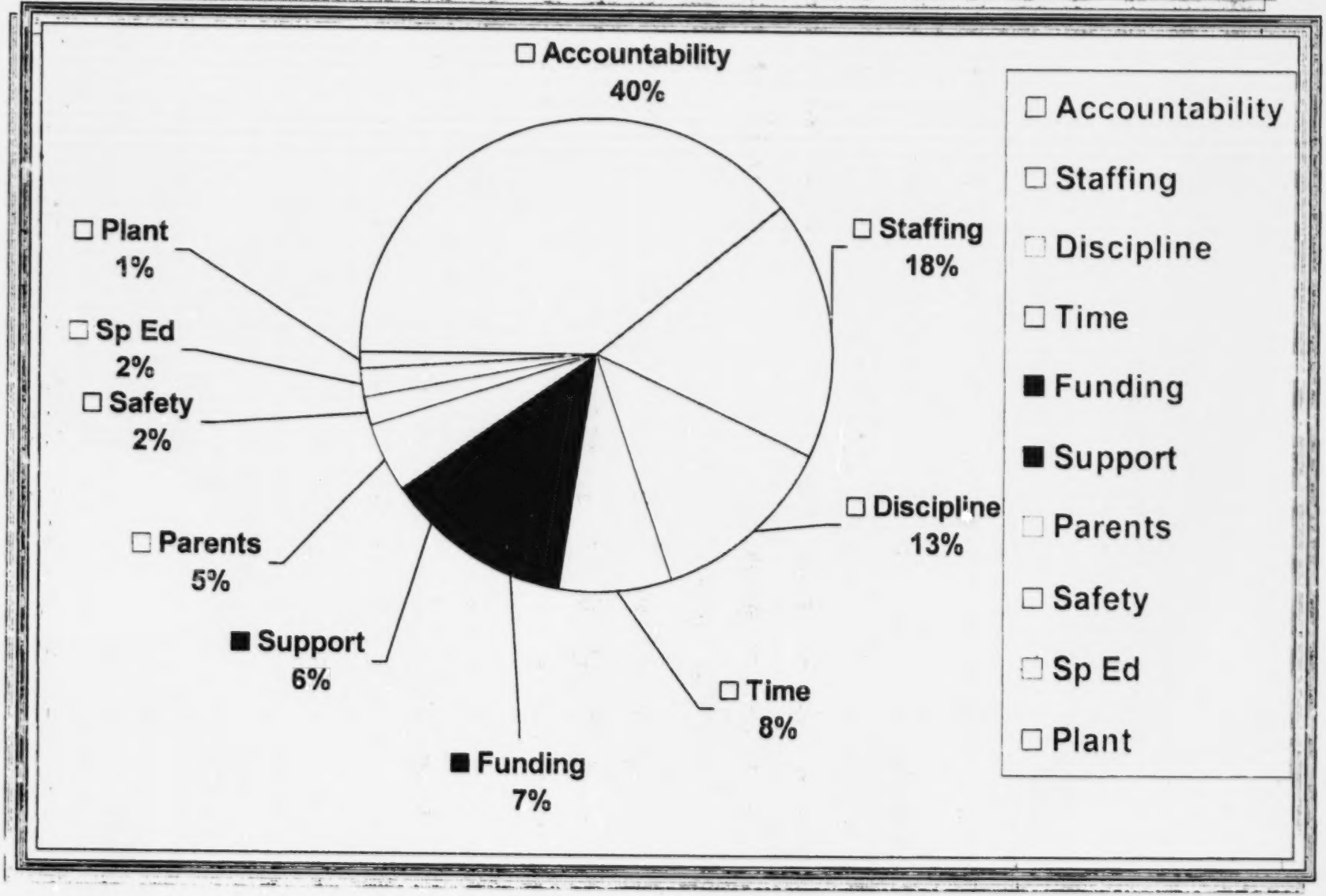
- Recorded relative frequency with which each response category appeared as most important.

&

- Used Ordinal Weighting Method



Issues Reported by Administrators



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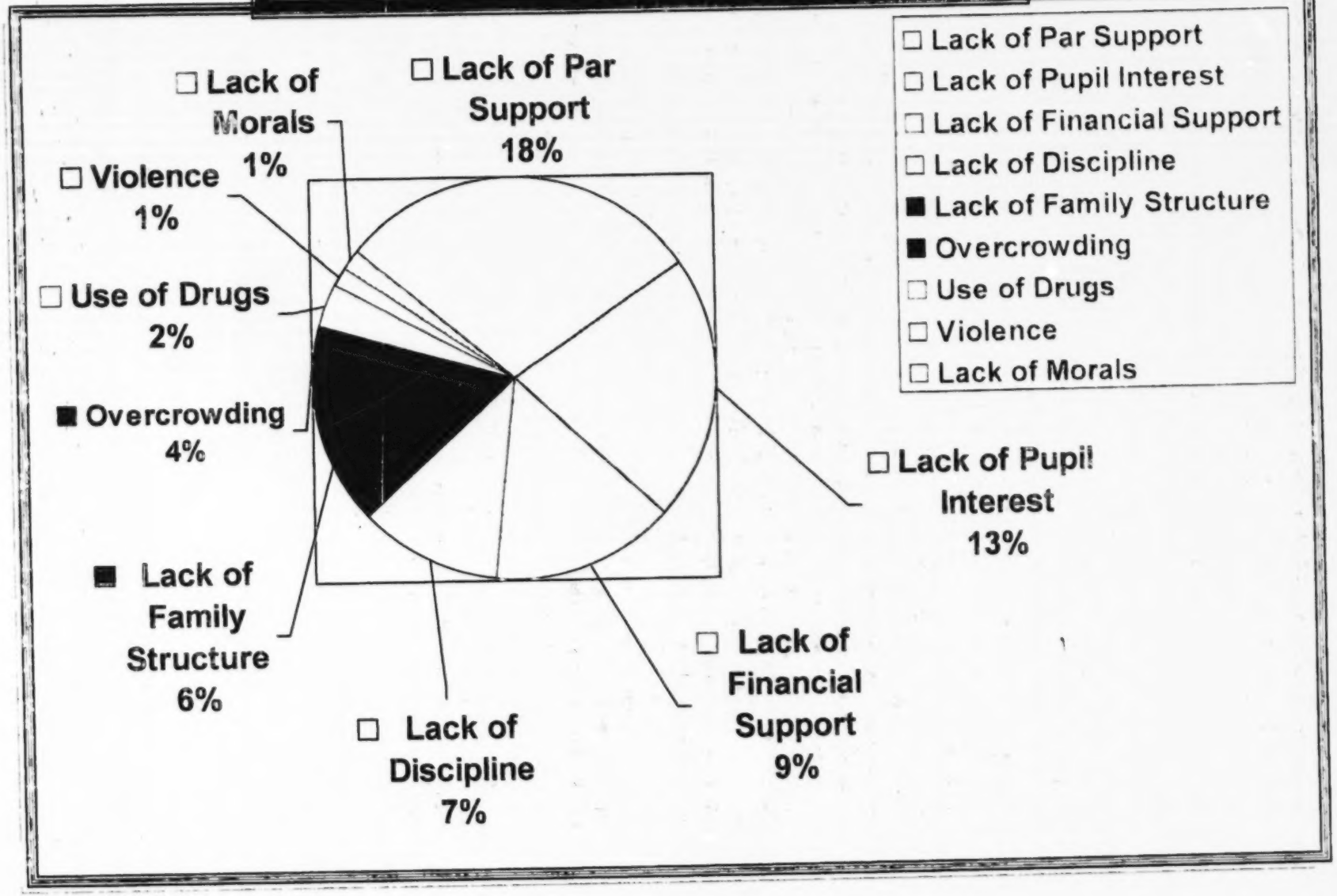
Issues Reported by Teachers



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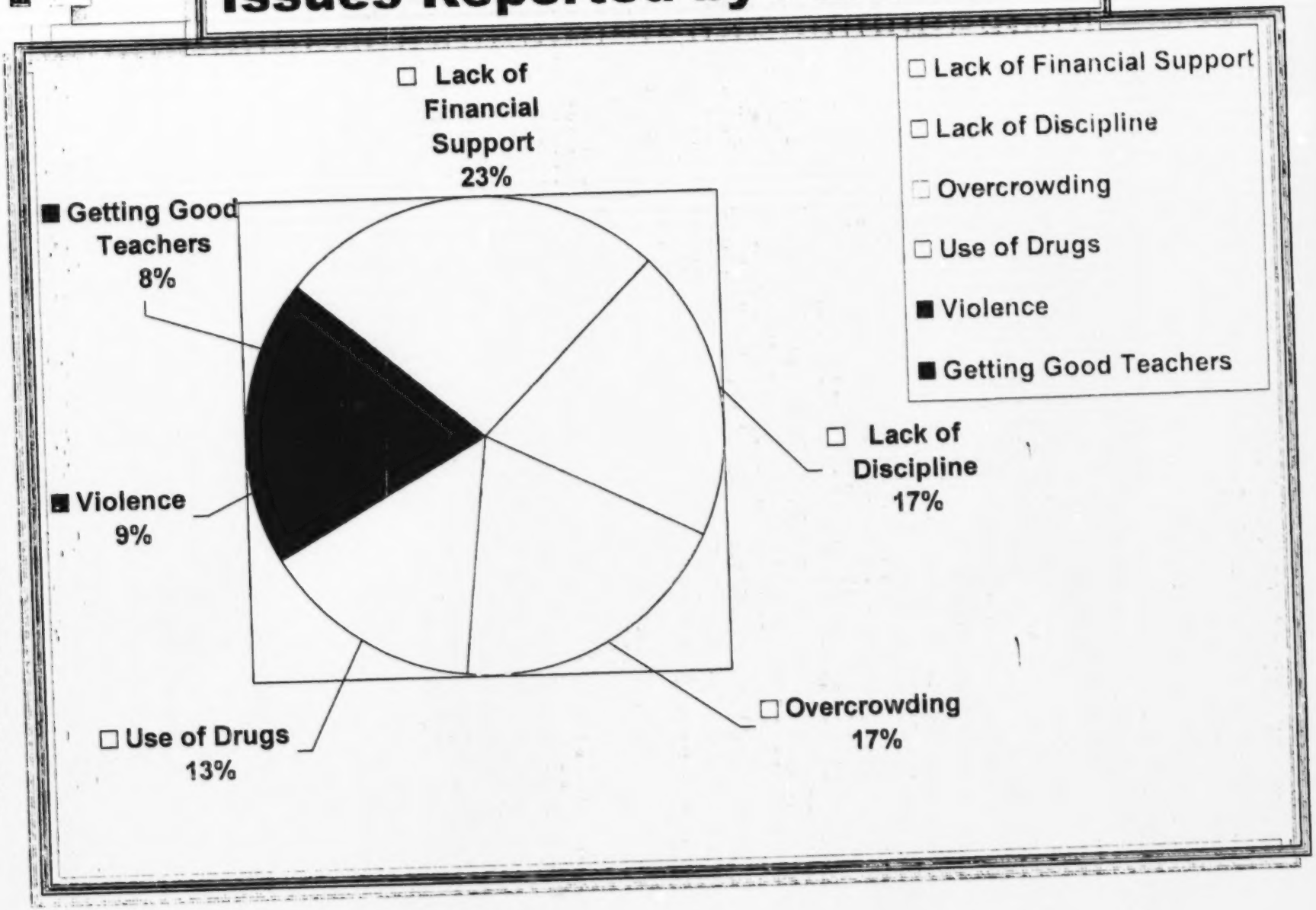
Issues Reported by Parents



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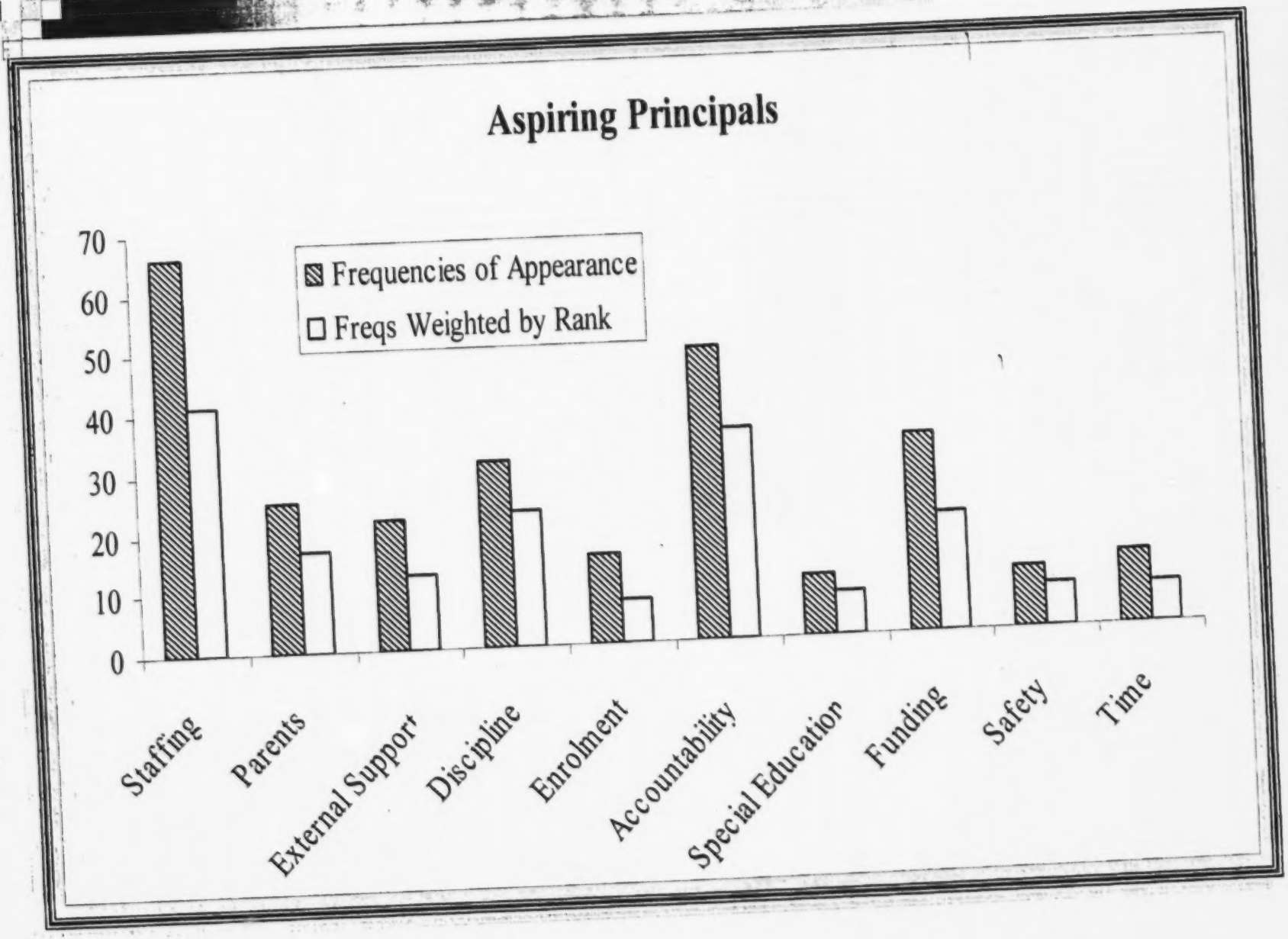
Aspiring Principals
70
60
50
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10
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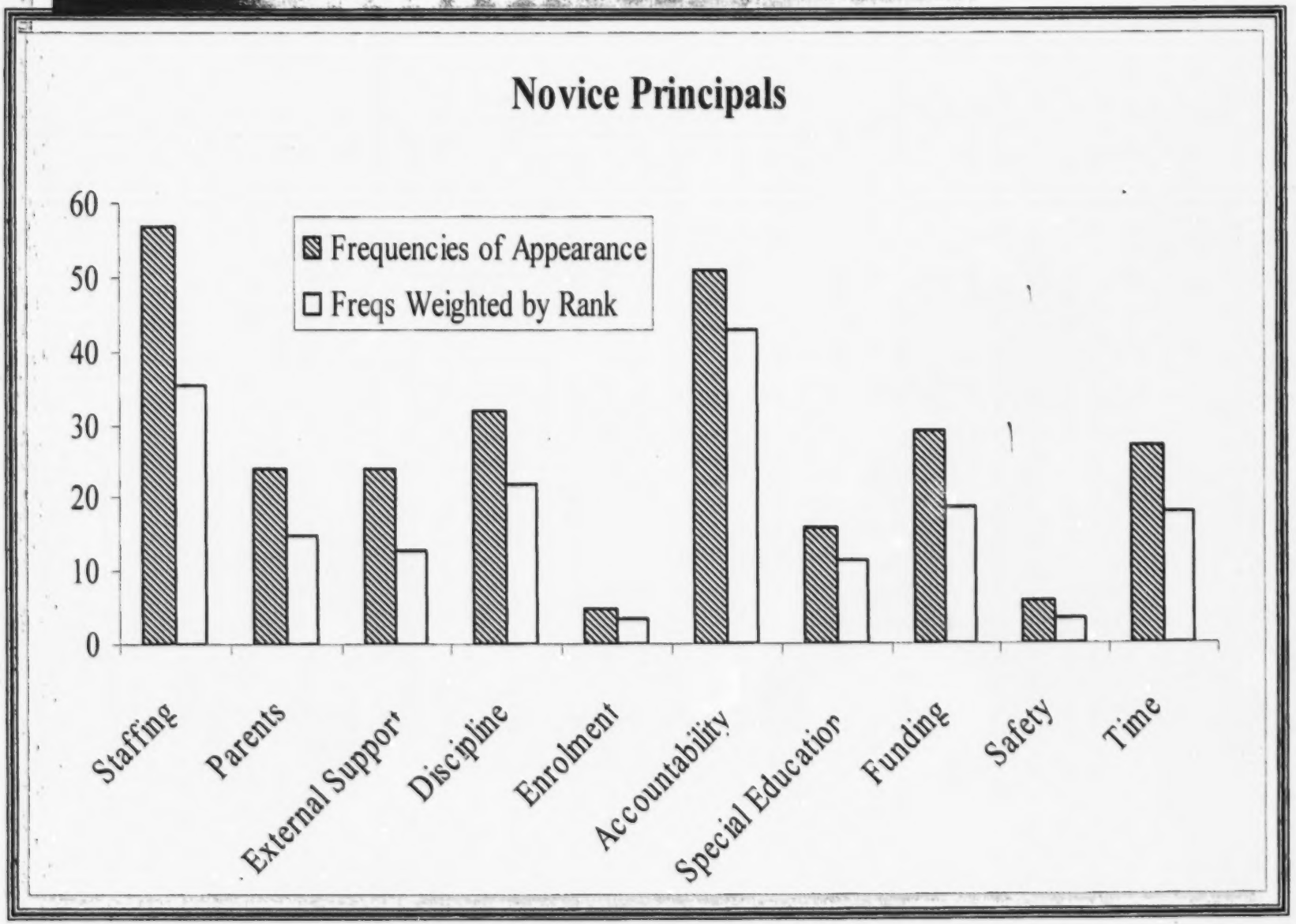
Frequencies of Appearance
Freqs Weighted by Rank
Staffing
Parents
External Support
Discipline
Enrolment
Accountability
Special Education
Funding
Safety
Time


Novice Principals
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Frequencies of Appearance
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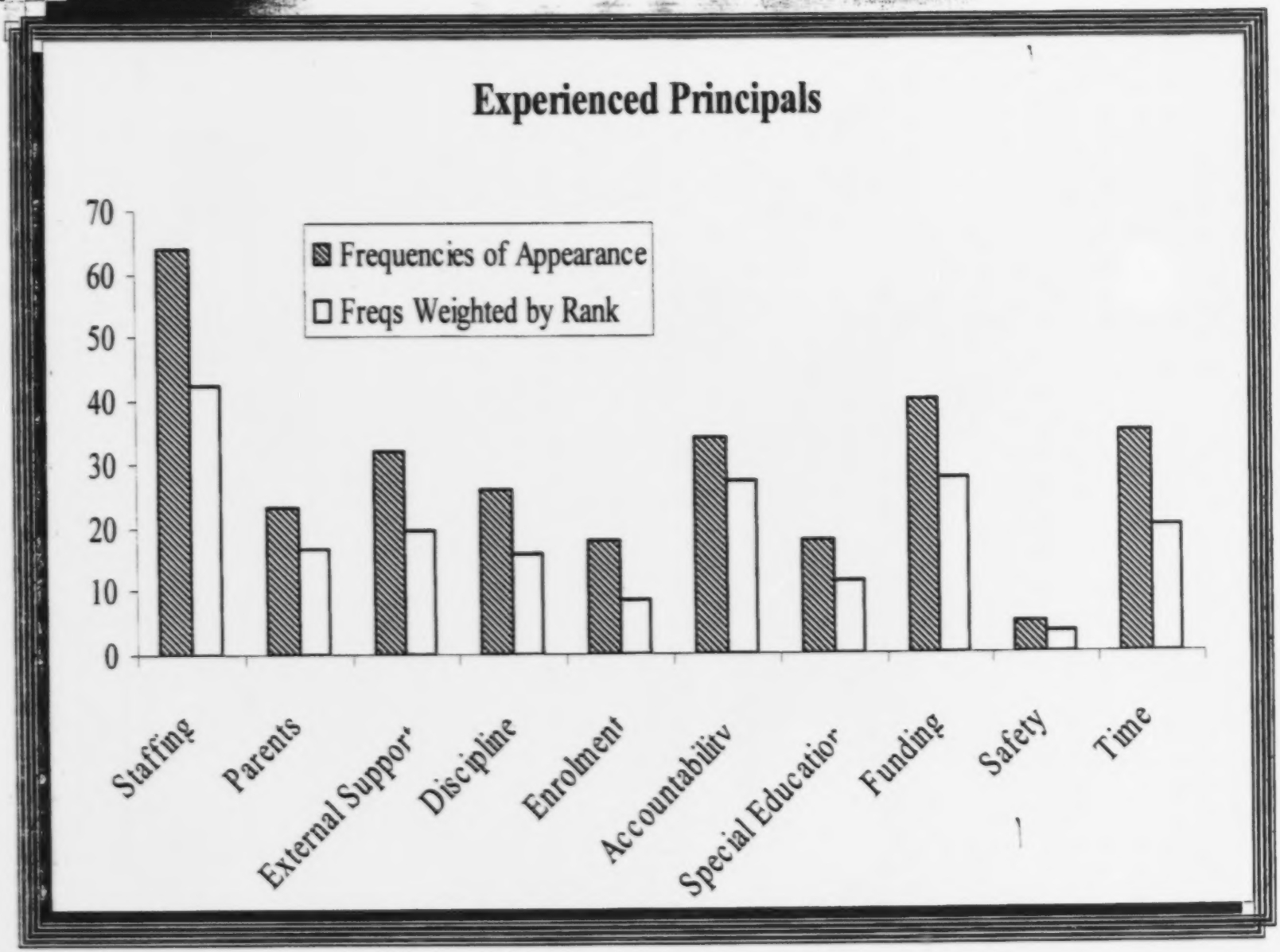
Parents
External Support
Discipline
Enrolment
Accountability
Special Education
Funding
Safety
Time


Experienced Principals
70
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Frequencies of Appearance
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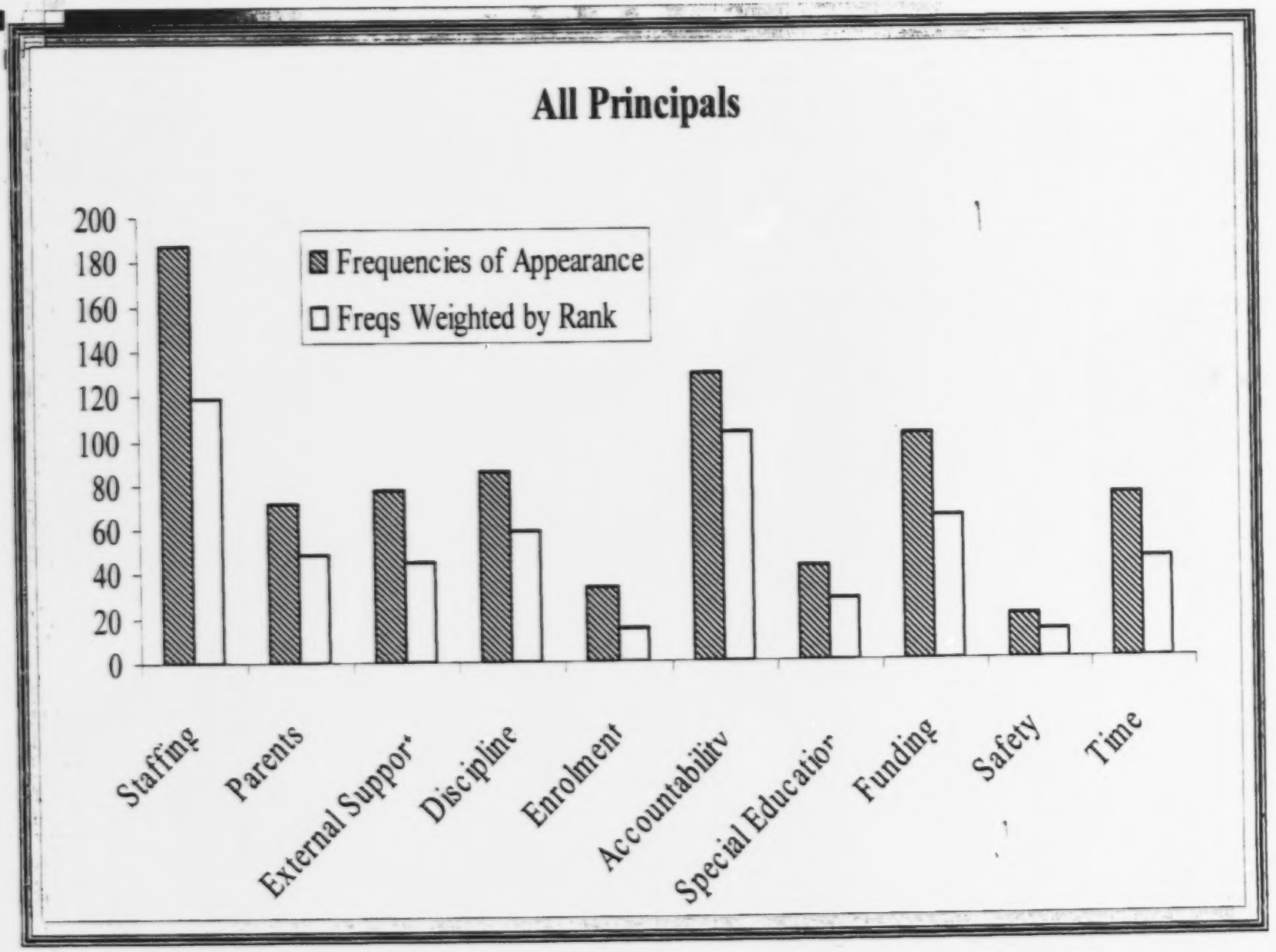
All Principals
200
180
160
140
120
100
80
60
40
20
0
Frequencies of Appearance
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Staffing
Parents
External Suppor
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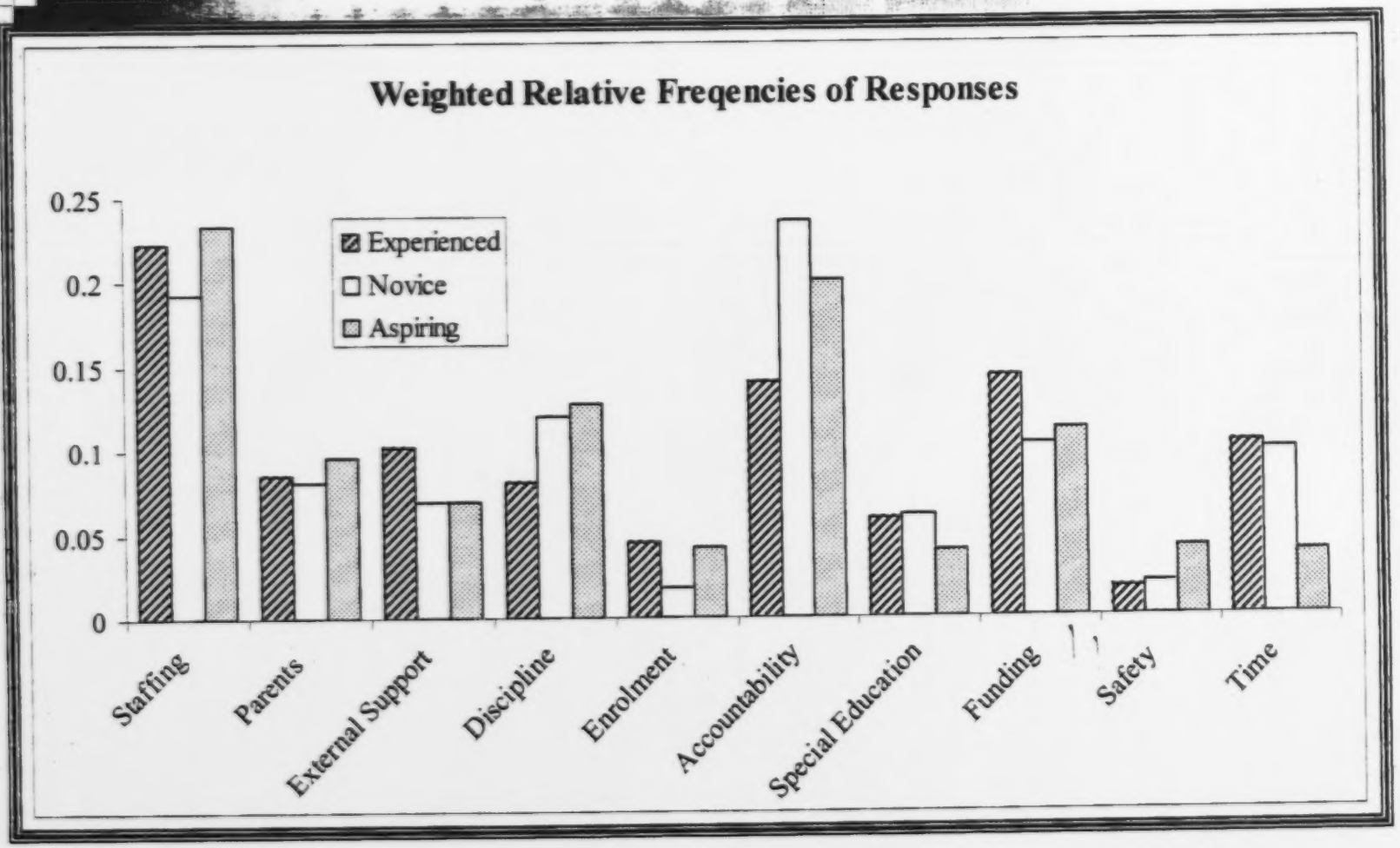
Weighted Relative Freqencies of Responses
0.25
0.2
0.15
0.1
0.05
0
Experienced
Novice
Aspiring
Staffing
Parents
External Support
Discipline
Enrolment
Accountability
Special Education
Funding
Safety
Time

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"I'm fighting a lion with a tooth pick!"

The title of this article is actually quoted directly from a principal who was asked to identify the most critical issues facing education today. The findings presented here indicate that many school administrators share this sentiment as they face urgent, resource-intensive and time-consuming tasks while being judged on one key issue: *school accountability*,- the academic performance of the students in their schools.

This writing will describe, compare, and contrast what principals, teachers, and parents view as education's most critical issues. The authors will then discuss the data and their implications and then propose strategies and tools for addressing the top concern of today's principals, i.e., accountability.

In the spring of 2003, over 130 aspiring, novice, and experienced K-12 principals from public, private and parochial schools were asked to identify the most critical issues facing schools. As shown below in Table 1, the issue most frequently identified as most critical was accountability.

Table 1. Issues Reported by Principals

Accountability	40%
Staffing	18%
Discipline	13%
Time	8%
Funding	7%
External Support	6%
Parents	5%
Safety	2%
Special Education	2%
Plant Operations	Less than 1%

Note (Figures add up to more than 100% because percentages for each category were rounded up where appropriate.)

Interestingly, these responses do not concur however, with those identified by teachers in the most recent Phi Delta Kappa Poll of Teacher's Attitudes (Langdon & Vesper, 2000). When asked to identify the greatest problems facing schools, teachers most frequently

cited lack of parental support/interest as the most critical issue (see Table 2).

Table 2. Issues Reported by Teachers

Parent's lack of support/interest	18%
Pupil's lack of interest/attitudes/truancy	13%
Lack of financial support/funding/money	9%
Lack of discipline/more control	7%
Lack of family structure/problems of home life	6%
Overcrowded schools	4%
Use of drugs/dope	2%
Fighting/violence/gangs	1%
Moral Standards/dress code/sex/pregnancy	Less than 1%

Note (Figures add to less than 100% because not all answers were reported.)

When parents were recently polled by Gallup regarding the greatest problems facing schools (see Table 3), the most critical issue identified was lack of financial support/funding/money (Rose & Gallup 2002).

Table 3. Issues Reported by Parents

Lack of financial support/funding/money	23%
Lack of discipline, more control	17%
Overcrowded schools	17%
Use of drugs/dope	13%
Fighting/violence/gangs	9%
Difficulty getting good teachers/quality teachers	8%

Note (Figures add to less than 100% because not all answers were reported.)

It is interesting that these three groups, principals, teachers and parents; differ in their opinion regarding the most critical educational issues. For instance, principals viewed

accountability as most salient, whereas teachers most frequently cited lack of parental support/interest. Parents most frequently cited lack of financial support. It is reasonable to attribute these differences to differences between the groups and to expend substantial discourse on the matter. Perhaps the differences suggest a more global problem worthy of further discussion. However, the present paper addresses the most prominent issues perceived by school administrators.

Accountability: the blame game

Principals ordinarily use the term "accountability" to mean ways in which test data and other information (e.g., attendance and dropout rates) are used to assess teachers, administrators, and education in general. These outcomes of the accountability system influence high-level decisions regarding the allocation of any number of rewards and/or punishments to institutions and individuals at all levels of an educational system (Sirotnik & Kimball, 1999). Accountability has essentially become a process of high-stakes testing, usually a single test for each grade. Although many factors influence student performance, the blame for low student test scores is most frequently directed at teachers, accused of being inadequately prepared and/or improperly delivering instruction, and at principals, accused of losing control of their schools and/or not providing adequate leadership. Unfortunately, the blame game is used to justify the punishment of teachers and administrators through reassignment or withholding of funding, among other means of punishment (Nevi, 2002).

The pressures resulting from this accountability can be overwhelming for school administrators. Principals are increasingly being held responsible for students'

standardized test scores. Recent reports of administrators who encourage cheating on standardized tests suggests a desperation felt by school officials whose jobs are on the line if test scores do not improve (Gilman & Lanman-Givens, 2001).

What affect is the accountability movement having on principals?

Many principals voice concern about the increasing use of students' standardized test scores to judge their performance. Some say their district's use of standardized test scores is mediocre at best. Principals also assert that the test themselves serve as an insufficient appraisal of student achievement or instructional excellence. As one principal put it, "Accountability is great, but schools should not be judged by what students do on one test on one day in March" (Johnson, 2002, p. 28).

In the study mentioned above, participants were asked to provide a one or two paragraph justification of the issue they listed as the most critical. These responses contained many heart-felt emotions reflecting the stress now felt by principals. The following are excerpts from these responses.

> *"State and federal accountability is an important focus that increases paperwork, increases parent/student conferences and staff development, strains budgets, and changes instructional strategies."*
>
> *"Accountability, although needed to some degree, has consumed the workday. Curriculum has been narrowed. Testing is too often and too much……There is a lack of understanding as to the energy required to raise test scores."*
>
> *"The pressure for higher labels does not make learning fun!"*
>
> *"The issue of accountability is now also an issue of job security."*

"Accountability is the most significant issue facing administrators today. With test scores being compared from school to school, more administrators feel the stress."

Unfortunately, it appears that many principals are retiring or finding a less stressful career to escape the stress of accountability. The stress also appears to be limiting the pool of new and aspiring principals. A survey by the Educational Research Service found that fifty percent of the 403 school districts surveyed indicated problems in replacing school principals. The teacher shortage is widely acknowledged; the principal shortage is just as real and no less significant (Gilman & Lanman-Givens, 2001).

Principals need help dealing with the additional stress placed on them by the accountability movement. When considering all of the other responsibilities of the principalship, accountability, as it is currently being implemented, may be the proverbial "straw that broke the camel's back" and is driving hundreds out of the profession or discouraging other from entering it.

However, principals may find it easier to deal with the stress of accountability by taking the advice found in Consumer Reports on Health, Job Stress: *Control is Key* (1997). The following is suggested:

Take control. Let the superintendent know that you would like more leeway to make your own decisions with the help of your staff.

Let go. Try to reign in the impulse to control. Delegation is a good.

Lighten up. Keep a detailed log of how you spend your time for an entire week. Review this log and make sure in the future that you allocate time to fulfill

all of you roles (i.e. parent, friend, son, spouse, etc.), not just that of principal.

Take a stand. Let the superintendent know if you are dissatisfied. But do not just complain, try to find solutions.

Be friendly. Even if you feel you are too busy, take the time to chat or have lunch with other adults. You will probably then work more efficiently upon your return.

Relax. Every couple of hours, try practicing some relaxation technique, such as meditation or just daydreaming.

Work out. People react less strongly to stress for several hours after an aerobic workout.

Get help. Do not be afraid to open up to friends and loved ones or consult a private therapist who specializes in work-related problems.

Addressing accountability

It is predicted that schools will see increases in school accountability and competition (Kosmoski, 2000). As a result, a growing number of principals are demanding that they have the final voice in curricular and organizational decisions and choices. If, in fact, more decision-making authority is given to principals, then they must have input and support from teachers and parents. Soliciting, organizing, and utilizing others' help and input, or sharing decisions, is the key to addressing school accountability.

Principals must truly believe in shared decision-making and teacher empowerment. If

teachers are empowered to contribute to successful accountability programs, they will! Teachers, by their very nature, want their students to succeed and if given the chance, will work hard to improve their students' achievement.

Smith and Andrews (1989) identified two essential roles of principals in effective schools, that of an instructional resource and a resource provider. The effects of teachers sharing in decision-making is limited without the benefit of reliable information (Weiss, Cambone, & Wyeth, 1992). As an instructional resource, principals must provide teachers with good information to make informed decisions. Once decisions are made, principals must provide the resources necessary to implement them. For example, it does no good for teachers to design a program using hand-held computers if they have none. It is the job of the principal to provide the resources or make sure that teachers don't build programs around resources they cannot acquire.

Engaging teachers

The following plan is one way principals can engage teachers in improving school performance scores as related to accountability programs. Before meeting with the faculty to initiate such a program, the principal should review all school performance data, summarize it, disaggregate it by departments and demographic information, provide copies to each teacher, and make it required reading. At the first full faculty meeting of the year, the principal should present an overview of the data (i.e., test scores, attendance rates, etc. and how their school score was calculated) and lead the staff through the following problem solving and analysis process (Wimpleburg, 2001). The principal should divide the faculty into smaller groups by grade-level or content areas, provide

a time line for completing each task, and allow each group to select a spokesperson and recorder.

1. *Identification of the problem.* (i.e. poor addition and subtraction skills). Generate no more than 2 or 3 key problems.

    a) Brainstorm—verbalize perceived problems, record verbalization without judgment or challenge, ask questions only to clarify meanings, and set time limit (Kaner, 1996).

    b) Cull and Combine—Discuss proposals then delete and combine proposals. Be sure and ask the teacher before deleting his/her proposal.

    c) Consensus or Vote—Aim for consensus, but if necessary vote (each person ranks 1st and 2nd choice).

2. *Identification of potential solutions.* Generate no more than 2 or 3 potential solutions.

    Follow the same steps as above.

3. *Identification of benefits and barriers.*

    a) Discuss benefits and barriers to each solution. Choose solution with most benefit and easiest to overcome barrier. Once again the aim of the group will be to come to consensus, but if not possible a vote should be taken by having each person rank the 1st and 2nd solution (Licata, 1977).

4. *Development of an action plan.*

    a) Action plans should have the following components.

Problem Statement (brief)

Action Steps (what will be done)

Timeline (when)

Required Resources (make sure resources are within the realm of the school)

Person Responsible (who will perform assigned task)

Evaluation (how will you know task is completed and measure its effectiveness)

This model was used during the 2001-2002 school year at Mandeville High School in Mandeville, Louisiana to develop a plan that lead to the improvement of the school's performance score. Teachers there embraced the process because the principal acted in a facilitative manner entrusting them with the important responsibility of determining the "how to" components of the plan. As facilitator, the principal helped the faculty determine the overall school vision and provided the resources and support teachers needed to implement their plans. By empowering teachers to decide upon their own plan of action, teachers felt a greater sense of ownership because the plans were in fact their own.

As a result of this effort, Mandeville High School's 2001-2002 school performance score increased by 3.8 points. Statewide, this score ranked sixth overall for all public high schools and first overall for non-magnet public high schools. The school was also selected a National School of Excellence, Blue Ribbon School.

Engaging parents

Parents must also be a partner in this process. Parental engagement increases student achievement. To have a program that successfully addresses accountability issues, principals must engage parents and solicit their input and assistance. Communication is a key issue in making good decisions that will positively impact school performance. Informing parents of accountability issues and involving them in the formulation of school improvement plans is important in mobilizing their resources and securing their support.

The following plan suggests strategies principals can use to foster parental engagement

in school improvement as related to accountability issues (Rasmussen, 1998).

1. Principals should be in attendance at all PTSA meetings and keep parents informed of all accountability-related issues.
2. Areas of improvement that can best be addressed by parents (i.e. improving attendance) should be discussed at all public meetings.
3. A parental advisory panel should be created to help formulate plans of action to improve school performance.
4. Parents, businesses and community partners should be asked for assistance (i.e., providing Saturday tutoring or funds to purchase computer software).
5. School improvement plans and programs should be advertised and detailed in the PTSA newsletter, local newspaper, and on the school web site.
6. Teachers should phone parents in the evening personally informing them of

school improvement programs aimed at addressing their children's needs (i.e., after-school tutoring or Saturday self-help sessions).

7. Parents should be given regular progress reports for those students participating in test preparation activities.
8. Principals should meet with parents at the end of the year to review school performance scores. Analysis of this data begins the school improvement process for the next school year.

The Lumberton Public School District is a good example of how successful parental/community involvement can be. During the 97-98 school year, this small district of less than 1000 students, made more gains on indicators in the Mississippi accreditation system than any other district in the state. This can be attributed in part to the direct efforts of the administration to engage parents and community members in the process of formulating a strategic plan and by keeping them informed of school-related matters, most importantly, matters of accountability. For example, nearly 90 parents, teachers, and community members were invited to participate in a strategic planning retreat. Once the overall goals of the district were established, these individuals continued to meet to formulate action plans and to monitor progress toward set goals. Special PTSA meetings were held to teach parents about the state's testing program, how to interpret scores, and to emphasize the importance of students doing their best on the exams. Parents were invited to volunteer to serve as tutors and test proctors and to participate in celebrations for gains in test scores. Informational posters were distributed throughout the

community. When the test results were in, parents were invited to meet with teachers to review individual student test scores.

Conclusion

The "No Child Left Behind Act" makes it clear that accountability issues are not going away any time soon. Accountability is the name of the game today and for the foreseeable future. Principals must do everything they can to address the issue and make it work for them and their schools (Sirotnik and Kimball, 1999).

It is our hope that this present paper will help highlight the enormous pressure felt by today's principals and present some ideas for addressing what has emerged as the most pressing issue: accountability.

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